

BREAK ON THROUGH: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAN STRUM

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Many neighbors of our neighbors have renovated their apartments or have plans to do so. Some are interested in straight-forward bathroom renovations; others wish to demolish walls or created break-through apartments. SPBuzz Editor Dan Strum interviewed Darren China, a long-time associate of his and founder of Studio China Architecture + Design to get some thoughts and ideas on renovation. Mr. China's company website can be visited at www.studio-china.com.

SPB: Many of my neighbors have performed renovations in their apartments. Some have hired architects, others have hired contractors. What's the difference?

DC: An architect and a contractor have two different roles in the construction process. Sometimes, especially for small projects, these roles can be carried out by the same person. In any case, in order to achieve a high quality finished space, it is essential to fulfill both roles.

An architect works closely with the client to understand the ways in which the space will be used. How does one live in the space? How will one occupy the space? Upon gathering this information the architect, using his/her educational background and experience in design, will work with the client to design and visualize the completed apartment. He/she will act as an advisor and resource in making decisions with regard to flow, continuity, materials, scale, constructability, etc. of the space. The architect will generate drawings of varying levels of detail so as to help the client understand what the end results' look and feel will be like. Working through the design challenges on paper — before material is ordered or labor arrives on site — enhances creativity, saves time, and saves money. In the end the architect will provide a highly detailed set of drawings to the contractor which will allow him to accurately price the project.

The contractors' role is that of builder. He brings with him vast knowledge of how to make raw materials become a tangible space. He will enlist a number of sub contractors to handle the various trades required in the project. These might include electrician, plumber, painter, carpenter, cabinet maker, etc. in order to carry out the design put forth by the client and architect. The passion and talents of the contractor lie in carrying out the design as put forth and creating a beautiful built space.

SPB: Is there a difference, in terms of price and timing between hiring an architect who will, in turn, hire a contractor, or hiring a contractor who can fulfill the role of architect?

DC: I don't believe it is an either/or scenario.

Obviously we are not talking about simple aesthetic projects like hiring a painter to repaint your kitchen or a plumber to replace a toilet. For these, by all means, just call a painter or a plumber! But when you begin to consider an apartment renovation where you are really interested in increasing your comfort of living both parties should be engaged.

New York has some of the most gifted contractors one can find. Their participation greatly enhances the projects they work on. But keep in mind, a contractor's responsibilities really lie in constructing the project, and they therefore tend to be more focused on building a project than the time in dealing with the intricacies of client tastes and creative solutions. Having said that, a contractor's creative proposal may be based only on his past experience or that which is easily constructed. This goes back to what I see as a primary role of the architect – to consult with the client and work with them to develop a unique vision of the space, informed by trends and best-practices, but free from any fixed notions of how things must be done.

SPB: Have you done much work in NYC apartments? What are the most common renovations?

DC: Yes I have done quite a bit of work in NYC apartments. The types of renovation work really are quite broad. Everything from combining one apartment with the one next door and complete apartment gut renovations to kitchen renovations to room divisions. Probably the two most common renovations are those in which people are trying to create an additional bedroom in their home. Often children have grown to a point where keeping two kids in one room is no longer feasible. The other most common is probably the bathroom renovation. Many co-op bathrooms haven't been updated since the 1950's and 1960's. They have the pink or green 4 inch by 4 inch tiles in them, the floors are worn and have become in need of new life. Bathrooms are very personal spaces and owners often like to make them feel comfortable. Kitchens are also often looked to for renovation as this is the most used space in the home. Many owners want to create a more open plan so as to integrate the kitchen with the rest of the apartment. Coupled with this we often design for new lighting to better light the cooking space and/or take advantage of natural light from windows while providing for new appliances, stone counters and new flooring. Often a large part of the goal is to create a great gathering space for the family. Kitchens are usually that space whether it is over breakfast or while cooking dinner.

SPB: Yes, I have had some neighbors who have done extensive kitchen renovations. How do you approach kitchen renovations? What are the biggest challenges they pose?

DC: As with any project we approach kitchens by asking questions. How do you currently use your kitchen? How do you wish you could be using your kitchen? What is currently working? What is not working? Etc. Armed with an understanding of how the owner and their family use the space or how they want to use the space we develop a number of planning options. We call these schematic designs. We then discuss these options with the owner. Often times we hybrid options together with the owner so as to find the most appealing and advantageous plan. We then begin to develop the details. This would include how the cabinets might be made based on owner needs. This also

includes selecting and presenting a number of options to the owner as to what sink is to be used, what faucets, microwave, oven, refrigerator, light fixtures, tiling, counter top surface, etc.

Once fixtures, appliances, finishes, and planning are all decided upon we generate drawings for the building to review and for contractors to use in providing pricing. We assist the owner in the review process, help them select a contractor and then oversee construction to be sure the ideas we have been discussing are carried out correctly.

The biggest challenge is often space. New York apartments regardless of how big they are, are always just a little too small it seems. The challenge is to make the space function and be beautiful with the allotted area. But there is always a solution. It's just a matter of finding it.

SPB: It sounds like you're leaving something out -- where do the bureaucracies of building codes, permits and co-op approval factor in?

DC: You're correct, there is the bureaucratic side to getting almost any project completed. As I had mentioned, once all the planning and details are decided upon we generate drawings for the building to review. The co-op board will have a management company who handles various aspects of your building including renovations within the complex. The co-op board and management will have created an alteration agreement which they will provide to the owner. This often outlines the required insurances needed from the contractor, what is or is not allowed to be done to the building as well as guidelines to protect the building and the other owners in general while you are performing your alterations. The building will require that their architect or engineer review our plans to be sure we are abiding by the requirements set forth in the alteration agreement and most often request that we file the project with the New York City Department of Buildings to ensure we meet code and acquire the correct permits. At this point I will help my client to hire an expediting consultant to take the drawings through the Department of Buildings and gain approval. I will coordinate with the consultant and adjust the drawings if needed to facilitate their approval. Once the project has been approved by the building department the contractor will be able to acquire the permits to begin construction. Also once the Department of Buildings has approved our project I will be able to provide the co-op Management company with any remaining items they may require, and ask the contractor that he provide proof of insurance as required by the co-op board.

Though this process may seem long and drawn out it typically flows pretty smoothly. My office takes care of virtually all aspects of the process and communicates with the buildings management company, building architect or engineer as well as the expediting consultant. And while we are waiting for the different parties involved to review and comment on the project we are continuing to develop the details and/ or interviewing contractors with the owner.

SPB: Do you have a favorite sort of renovation or style?

DC: I tend to lean more toward the contemporary or transitional styling. A transitional style is a “cleaned up” version of traditional architecture. It’s a more clean lined approach to the ornate aspects you find in traditional work.

Often people think of contemporary or modern as a super clean, pristine, often white space. Almost cold. I don’t agree. You can have a contemporary space while simultaneously having a warm, intimate space bathed in natural light. You can still use natural woods and complimentary tiles, glass, etc.

Regardless though, my favorite sort of renovation is the one in which the client isn’t afraid to come to the table with ideas. One in which they engage and really collaborate on the process. It makes it fun and it makes for a better project in the end.

SPB: Between concept development, design, filing and actual construction, how long do projects take?

DC: Time is a tough question. Like cost there are so many variables involved that it is almost impossible to answer. But in reality I find it often gets dictated by the client and how quickly they can make decisions. Other variables include size of project, speed at which the building reviews the drawings, the chosen contractor and their schedule, etc. In general though when designing and building a full apartment renovation I find myself working with the client for roughly 10 months from start to finish.

SPB: I know that large-scale renovation can be very expensive. How do you approach the pricing of your projects?

DC: The cost of a project has many variables not the least of which is, how extensive is the project? But the real question behind costs is, what are the clients objectives for the space? What caliber of materials, finishes and even contractor are you interested in? I often feel that an owner should consider what kind of investment they are willing to make in creating a home with the qualities they desire. Then we can design toward that level of investment. The first step of course is to have a discussion so we may explore some of the goals and develop a framework for pursuing the project.

SPB: Thank you for your time!

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